

CE Magic

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Houdini may have said once that if manipulated in just the right way, with just enough desire, one swipe of the hand could create an enchanting forest from a speck of dust. In Central Iraq, Houdini style magic is an everyday phenomenon performed before an all-working audience by Naval Mobile Construction Battalion Seventy-Four's, (NMCB-74) Construction Electricians, (CE's).

Having electricity is one thing. Figuring out how to harness, wire and supply it is providing to be quite another for these Seabees. Having to deal with a mixture of American, British, Iraqi and Japanese wiring, most of which is antiquated, without any type of organization or color code, has been nothing less of a nightmare. Combining this, with having to scavenge fifty percent of their working equipment utilizing Seabee ingenuity and bartering skills with neighboring commands, has been both stressful and time consuming. However, in the brief description these CE's gave this electronics' laymen, one can readily realize the feeling of pride in their work; so much stronger than if they had been given all the right equipment to complete their numerous projects.

These on base projects range geographically from NMCB-74's camp, to the First Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) Engineer Group (MEG) headquarters, to multiple Marine berthing and operations areas. On camp, they include a complete barracks renovation, lights, receptacles, the armory, berthing, a 20,000 square foot company space building that includes medical and supply, along with two Morale, Welfare and Recreation, (MWR) buildings.

The exploits of the NMCB-74 CE's become more astonishing when one sees the tedious methods they must use to discover the wire endpoints of each circuit breaker. They are forced to perform continuity checks for each of the thousands of wire throughout these projects. This procedure entails hooking a ground wire in the panel box, then attaching an ohmmeter to the end point of every wire in the particular building until you find the match. This is a laborious process that follows hours of cleaning out the wires from the poor state they were found in. However, as CE3 Seth Chhouk and CE3 Mark Lahey state, "Once in a while, you get lucky and hit the correct wire on the first try".

The magic these CEs perform daily along with their ever present, positively infectious personalities, have spread throughout the MEF Base. The demands for their services, like so many of the other Seabee rates, are beyond their manpower. However, like most of the NMCB-74 Seabees, 'we cannot fix that' is not a phrase in their vocabulary. A CE Seabee responding 'no' to a 'can you do this?' question is like Houdini saying he can't perform a magic trick in front of a packed theater.